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Thursday, 10 October 2024

Dear Secretary of State for Transport,

I run a campaign against smart motorways after my husband, Jason Mercer, was killed on one in 2019.

What started off as a minor bump turned into “a scene of absolute carnage” These were the words of my Police Liaison Officer as he was trying to explain to me how a minor bump had resulted in an outcome so traumatic details of exactly what happened to the bodies of those involved was kept from the public.

The initial bump barely even damaged the vehicles, yet after the inevitable happened the extended scene of carnage was so bad the emergency services “didn’t know who was with which vehicle” and next of kin was only located when I rang the police saying I suspected my husband was involved in the collision that was crippling Sheffield and Rotherham that morning.

Myself and the family of Alexandru Murgeanu also had to answer if we thought anyone else might have been in the vehicles with our loved ones, as the emergency services “weren’t sure they had found everyone”

And then to add insult to fatality, their bodies could not be removed from the road for hours and hours and hours! because the coroner and undertaker could not get through the 4 lanes of stuck traffic.

All this from a minor bump! If there had been a hard shoulder, this would never have happened. We don’t need sensors and radar, we need a tangible, fool proof separate lane.

The technology that was in place when Jason was killed (MIDAS) didn’t work, it took many members of the public ringing in to get the motorway closed. and SVD wasn’t installed at this point because the opening of this section (M1 J34) like so many other sections, was rushed through.

The cameras were installed, but the ratio of operators to cameras actually being monitored does not allow cameras to be effective in *detecting* incidents.

On top of the known problems, new policy after policy is being implemented to seemly make smart motorways even more dangerous:

- Central reservations are being changed from metal to cement, how do EMS access a collision site through the central reservation now?
- National Highways have suddenly in the last few months stopped closing the first lane to allow drivers to exit one of these much-praised Emergency Refuge areas, so now breakdown trucks loaded with extra passengers and their broken vehicle have to join a fully running motorway lane at about 5mph

Please help fund the fight to stop this happening to others

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- The Crown Prosecution Service took legal advice from legal advisors “shared” with National Highways, which resulted in the decision that NH do not owe the public a duty of care. So a privatised department of the government can generate profit and pay big bonuses, but does not have to consider safety.

The sanitised, wholesome version of smart motorways that is presented in the slick (expensive) adverts and PR events, is very far from the truth. I speak to more control room operators and traffic officers than you do, and they tell a very different story. Which details software with so many problems they call it DIENOW instead of DYNAC, management concentrating on forcing staff to sign NDA's so they don't whistle blow, rather than reducing deaths. Being measured on time taken to perform minor functions, rather than watching the cameras, staffing ratios that result in such levels of stress that people are becoming ill because of their job! One quote to me: “we are just sat on the front-line wondering if we are going to watch anyone die today”

And none of these touches on the disproportionate discrimination to older and/or disabled people, which is outright illegal in any other area of life.

Please stop pretending there isn't a very major problem with smart motorways that a tech improvement will fix. No technology in the world is going to get emergency vehicles through 4 lanes of hemmed in traffic.

You were very clear in your letter circulated to me last year, that smart motorways are “inherently dangerous and not fit for purpose” Please don't carry on down the path that the previous 4 cabinets in the last 5 years have done, and suddenly change your position once you're in office. This will be the next Grenfell, only this time it might be a bus full of school children and it will be on your watch.

I have repeatedly requested a meeting with you over the last few years, via my MP, via letters and more recently I've taken to posting requests on social media and tagging you, but to no avail!

At the labour party conference last month, you stated on national TV that you would meet smart motorway campaigners on this subject.

I am a smart motorway campaigner, I live 6 miles from your constituency, several members of my family are your constituents

Please honour one promise of late and meet with us.

Regards

Claire Mercer

On behalf of Smart Motorways Kill

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